

Romance is in the air at The Address Dubai Marina. On Valentine's Day, Mazina restaurant is offering a four-course menu and beverages for two plus a complimentary box of gourmet handmade chocolates. Dh735 per couple, from 7pm to 11.30pm. Call 04 436 7777 to book



Yalumba at Le Méridien Dubai Hotel is **celebrating Australian Day on January 24 with a Friday brunch featuring Aussie specialities.** From 12.30pm to 3.30pm, Dh499 per person. Call 04 217 0000 to book, or visit www.yalumba-dubai.com for more information



From top, washing with a chelamchi lota; glasses of gol sherbet; and eating from the same thaal. Above right, Arwa Kaka (facing camera, next to man) and family enjoy a meal at her home in Mumbai. Subhash Sharma for The National



Share and share alike

Bohra Muslims have a distinctive cuisine and very particular eating practices that keep the community together, as **Priti Salian** reports

A Bohra meal begins by passing the salt. And it is only after each partaker seated around a big platter has tasted it that the first course is served. Bohra Muslims, who are said to have migrated originally from Yemen to Gujarat, are firm believers in the maxim: "The family that eats together, stays together."

The entire Bohra family dines out of one platter called the thaal. It can typically accommodate eight people. It is elevated with a tarakti

(stand) placed on a square piece of cloth called a safra, laid out on the floor. The thaal should not be left unattended, so it is not placed until at least one person is seated for a meal.

During a community meal, food is not served until all eight diners are present, because "the portions served are just right for eight", according to Priya Badshah, a Mumbai-based mother-of-two.

All heads should be covered during a meal and Bohra women do so with their pardis (veils) that are part

of their traditional brightly coloured and beautifully embroidered or appliquéed ridas, which are worn in place of the abaya. Bohra men are easy to identify in their white topis (head caps) with golden embroidery. Once everyone is seated, one serving member walks with water in a chelamchi lota (a kind of basin and jug) for everyone to wash their hands.

Outside the home, women and men sit at different thaals and eat using the right hand. "Usage of the left hand is taboo in the thaal, even if it is to pick up a spoon to scoop out ice cream," Badshah says.

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The unending courses

Interestingly, the first, though not the only, course is dessert.

"We consider it auspicious to begin our meal with a sweet dish," says Arwa Kaka, a Mumbai-based public

relations manager. In the Bohra language, all desserts are called mithaas and the savoury dishes kharaas. Bohras love ice cream, so it is served first, unless it's celebration time, when the sodannu (cooked rice with ghee and sugar) takes the first place.

A meat starter follows and gives way to another dessert. At a Bohra wedding, several courses of kharaas and mithaas are served alternately, but on an ordinary day at home, one round of starters and two desserts is the norm Bohra families follow before the main course, or jaman, appears. Jaman can include a meat dish, which is eaten with chapattis or parathas, and a rice dish that

could be anything from a biriyani to kaari chaawal (curry with rice) to dal chaawal palidu (lentil rice with curry - see recipe).

Besides the usual accompaniment of a raita, soup could also be served with the rice. And when it's time for the jaman to end, it is also time to bring in another round of dessert. But that's not all. Dry fruits and paan (betel leaves) are a must before the family members taste the salt again to cleanse their tongues. "We Bohras believe that salt cures us of 72 diseases," Kaka says.

For Bohras, consuming meat is not only a matter of taste but also an act of piety. "A baby by the age of one is usually ready to taste meat," says Jumana Murtaza Lakdawala from Dubai, who settled in Halvad, Gujarat, after her marriage. Goat, lamb and chicken are relished, while beef is avoided. Certain types of fish are also eaten, but they have to be caught alive and can be killed only after the saying of "Bismillah" to make it halal.

One food for all

Every Bohra house around the world gets food from a local community centre, called Faize Mawaid-e-Burhani. This community centre caters for all three meals every day of the week except Sundays.

There is no price tag on the food, so families pay whatever they can afford. There are no receipts nor records of payments. Most well-to-do people make generous donations to keep the centre running and ladies volunteer to make chapattis at the centre.

The idea is to provide quality food to all members of the community, irrespective of whether they can afford it or not.

When it's time to celebrate

No celebration in a Bohra home is complete without dal chaawal palidu and sodannu. The first day of Muharram is celebrated with a thaal of 28 to 52 dishes. This is to ensure abundance in the ensuing year. Lachka - crushed and boiled wheat and roasted semolina with oodles of butter, jaggery and dry fruits - is an integral part of this meal. Khichda, a richly flavoured combination of lentils and mutton, garnished with green garlic, is a must on the 10th day of Muharram. Gol sherbet, a lemonade in which jaggery replaces sugar, is garnished with tukmuriya seeds and especially relished during Ramadan.

Bohra meals are undergoing changes. Many wedding thaals are now seen serving lasagnes, wontons and sizzlers. "But the age-old tradition of eating together out of one thaal will never change," concludes Kaka.

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Dal chaawal palidu. Subhash Sharma for The National

Make a Bohra dish at home

Recipe by Fatema Kaka, a homemaker from Mumbai. Serves 3

Ingredients

For dal chaawal

- 1 cup split pigeon peas (toor dal)
- ½ tsp turmeric
- Salt to taste
- 1½ cup rice
- 2 cups water

For palidu

- 200g bottle gourd or 2 drumsticks cut into 4 pieces each
- 1 medium tomato, chopped
- 2 tbsp wheat flour
- 2-3 kokum (Garcinia indica)
- ½ tsp fenugreek seeds
- ¾ tsp red chilli powder
- ½ tsp coriander and cumin powder
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- ½ inch stick cinnamon
- 3 cloves
- 6-7 curry leaves
- 1 onion, sliced in thin rings
- 150g cooked mince (optional)
- 1 tbsp garlic paste
- 3 tbsp refined oil

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Method
1 Pressure-cook the pulses

(dal) with turmeric and salt until about 75 per cent done. Strain and add tomato and drumsticks/gourd, kokum, red chilli powder and coriander and cumin powder to the residual water, and keep aside for palidu.

2 Heat half the refined oil in another vessel and add cumin, cinnamon, cloves and the curry leaves. Follow it up with onion and sauté until it turns brown.

3 Add the cooked dal to this vessel. Stir and add the mince, if using.

4 Cook rice (chaawal) in another vessel until about 75 per cent done.

5 Put the rest of the refined oil in another vessel and add fenugreek seeds and garlic paste and sauté for a minute. Mix in the wheat flour, sauté for two minutes and add the residual dal water to it. Keep covered on heat until the vegetables are cooked. The palidu is ready.

6 To serve, place a layer of dal in a vessel and cover it up with the rice. Follow with two more such layers and end with a final layer of rice. Garnish with coriander and eat it with palidu.

Bohra food in the UAE

Ezzy Nimco, Dubai; 04 272 2670

Bangalore, Dubai; 055 106 7652

Ezzy Farsan, Dubai; 04 271 6484

New Ezzi, Dubai; 04 266 3334

Al Jafanat, Dubai; 050 457 8652

Burhani Catering, Dubai and Ajman; 050 257 0075

There are no Bohra restaurants in Abu Dhabi